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ABSTRACT

This book offers suggestions to help parents make their children successful readers and learners. The first chapter, Getting Started, discusses setting an example, being a tutor, creating a positive environment, and letting children be the stars. The second chapter, The Reading Process: Building Meaning, discusses setting a purpose, stages of the reading experience, skills and meaning, finding relationships, and evaluating. The third chapter, Improving Your Child's Reading Comprehension, addresses talking about unfamiliar words, setting a clear purpose, asking questions to aid thinking, and asking follow-up questions. The fourth chapter, Stories To Practice Reading, contains stories parents can use to practice the ideas presented in the book. Based on the self-directed learner philosophy, this book and the others in the series provide: essential comprehension techniques; basic vocabulary and phonics skills; clear guidelines for efficient study; critical thinking frameworks; and activities that lead to becoming a self-directed learner. Each book in the series also provides quick answers to pressing learning problems; easy practice activities for basic skills; common language explanations; and step-by-step guidance to engage children in active learning. (RS)

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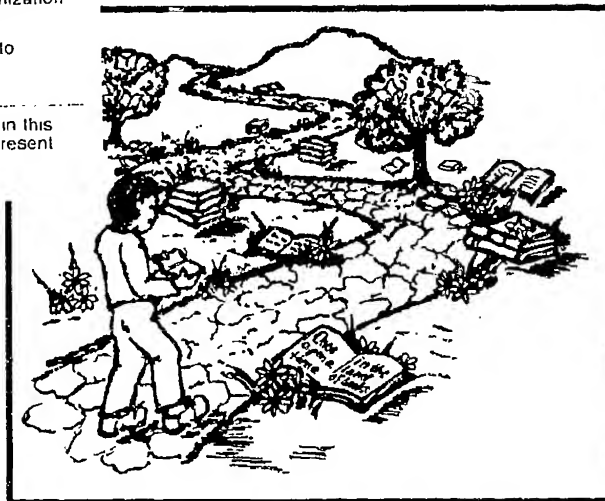
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Improving Reading and Learning

A practical guide
for parents and tutors

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by Carl B. Smith

CS 013 822



Clearinghouse on Reading,
English, and Communication

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**FAMILY
LEARNING
ASSOCIATION**

HELPING CHILDREN TO LEARN SERIES

***Improving
Reading
and Learning***

A practical guide
for parents and tutors

by Carl B. Smith



Clearinghouse on Reading,
English and Communication

&

The Family Learning Association

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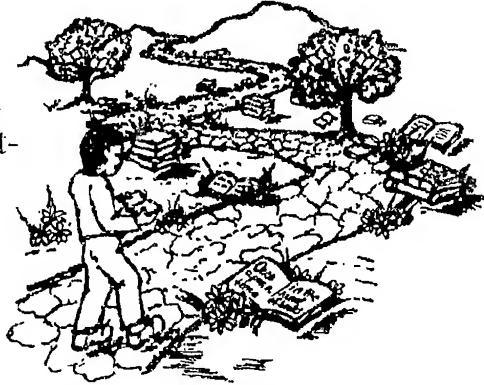
*The object of teaching a child is to enable him
to get along without his teacher.*

—Elbert Green Hubbard

**Our objective in this self-
directed learner series is to
teach children to think so they
will be independent learners.**

Getting Started

When children start school, they expect to learn to read *right now*. Many children come home after the first day of school and complain they haven't learned to read yet. Actually, kindergartners already know a lot about reading, and most children begin reading and writing long before first grade. They pick up cues from television, from print media, and from their parents.



These and other factors affect children's attitudes about what kind of readers and writers they will be.

Teachers and parents can help children take advantage of a natural desire to learn and curiosity about the printed word. This encourages a strong interest in books and an enthusiasm for learning. These early experiences will shape a child's opinion of reading. If they feel good about their progress, they are likely to stick with reading and continue to improve. But if early reading experiences are negative, some children may avoid books altogether.

Many of our comments and activities are directed towards parents. As a parent, you are in a position to help your child overcome some hurdles that young learners face. With your guidance, your child can move ahead in reading, instead of allowing early problems to multiply. The more you make reading interesting and meaningful, the more likely your child is to succeed in school.

On the following pages you will find suggestions to help make your child a successful reader and learner.

Set an Example

What can you do to make reading and learning important in your child's early years?

- ❖ **Let your child see you read.** As your child's first and most influential model, you show the value of reading by reading in his or her presence. Gradually a message is impressed on your child's brain: "Reading is important because Mom and Dad read things every day."
- ❖ **Read to your child.** This lets your child know that reading is a personal communication—a warm, friendly experience. In the early months, merely reading the newspaper aloud with your child on your lap or lying next to you begins a relationship that grows across the years as you read easy books, fairy tales, adventure stories, and other books. Some parents make bedtime reading a nightly ritual that lasts many years.
- ❖ **Listen and respond to your child's questions.** We all know that young children can drive us crazy with questions that seem like childish prattle. However, children ask questions in order to learn. We parents should treat these questions as opportunities to learn as well. Many of our children's questions can be answered from our own background, but some may stump us. Those are the ones that enable us to go to an encyclopedia or other book and find an answer by reading. This is another important image you want to place in your child's mind: "We can find answers in books."

Can you think of situations in which you might have made good use of a chance to serve as a model for reading or to answer your child's questions? Jot down your notes here as you think about ways to apply the ideas we have been talking about.

- ❖ **Encourage your child to write—and then ask for the meaning of the message.** During the first couple of grades in school, children learn to print, to spell, and to write messages that we can understand. But those messages are usually brief, and so it is quite normal for a parent to ask: “Will you tell me more about this message or story?” That gives each child a chance to explain what is actually on his or her mind.

Even in preschool years, however, most children scribble and draw on paper. Sometimes those scribbles contain random letters of the alphabet. Children realize that the printed page stands for a story or a message and they often have a story in mind when they scribble and draw. It helps, then, for you to say: “Tell me what you are writing.”

❖ **Build a reading environment in your home.**

Place books, magazines, and newspapers in prominent places and encourage everyone to use them. Read to each other and write to each other, even if it's only a note on the refrigerator. Through these various activities you create the positive attitude that reading and writing are useful, fun, and important. That's a winning attitude for school.



Be a Tutor for Your Child

Classroom teachers determine their best approach to reading instruction and choose materials that students will use. Parents play a complementary role as tutors at home. You can help children understand the value of their school studies by showing how these studies relate to reading and writing in the real world. **Ask children to read headlines** or appropriate sections of magazines, newspapers, and books at home, and remind them that they can learn to read successfully.

Practice reading in a setting that is comfortable for the two of you. Is a card table fun? Is there a chalkboard in the kitchen? Can you sit on a porch swing and concentrate? You can focus your practice strictly on those areas that you think are important for your child to understand.

Tutors can help to **focus learning** by explaining ideas that are not clear and by providing guided practice. As a parent, you can do the very same things for your child at home. Without focus, children don't know what they're trying to achieve. When your child brings home a reading assignment, play the role of a friendly tutor by following the suggestions. After each item, jot down your ideas on how you might apply the suggestion to the things your child is reading today.

✧ **Help focus the activity.** What is the purpose? What do you want to learn?

✧ **Keep the learner on target.** Are you achieving the purpose? Are you learning anything yet?

✧ **Answer your child's questions.** Try to clarify directions or language when they present stumbling blocks.

✧ **Practice reading together.** Use assignments as an opportunity to read and learn together. Children should feel free to read to you, and you should be willing to read to them.

Create a Positive Environment

When you help your child practice reading at home, you encourage learning simply by offering a place that's free from the competitive pressures of the classroom. The home setting is ideal for letting children know that they are making progress: their answers are good, their ideas are interesting, and you know they are working and you appreciate the hard work. If children receive this kind of feedback, they are likely to feel better about their reading achievements and may be more willing to tackle even tougher exercises.

You can assure children's success by beginning with exercises that are within their abilities. As the exercises get a bit harder, it's important for you to continue to provide encouragement. In periods of slower progress, be sure to tell children that the exercise they're working on really is a tough one, that they're making a good effort, and that they're going to figure out the answer by continuing to work on the exercise.

Creating a positive environment means more than encouraging children with compliments about their efforts. They also need to see that they are making progress and have some resources that will assist with school work. We'll show you how throughout this book.

Athletic coaches make an effort to build team spirit, create incentives, and get good equipment and facilities. Parents who want their children to succeed can do much the same thing. Children need to feel that their efforts in reading and learning are important to the family, and they sense this importance through your concern and through your enthusiasm for their accomplishments.

Let your child be a star

One incentive for hard work is the chance for your child to show what he can do. Listen to him read. Ask him to retell a story. When he has written a summary of a story or a reaction to it, read his paper aloud and discuss his ideas with pride. He worked hard; now is his time to be a star. To make homework more valuable in his eyes, supply him with his own desk or work space with dictionary, paper, pens—and maybe access to a computer, if that is within your means.

By creating this kind of positive environment you are setting the tone for success. Hard work, of course, is still an essential ingredient.

Children may become impatient with their reading efforts and decide that it just isn't worth the trouble to keep trying. This is a natural reaction, but it is one that you can and should try to overcome. You are an important role model. Show that you value education; then your child is likely to adopt the same view of learning.



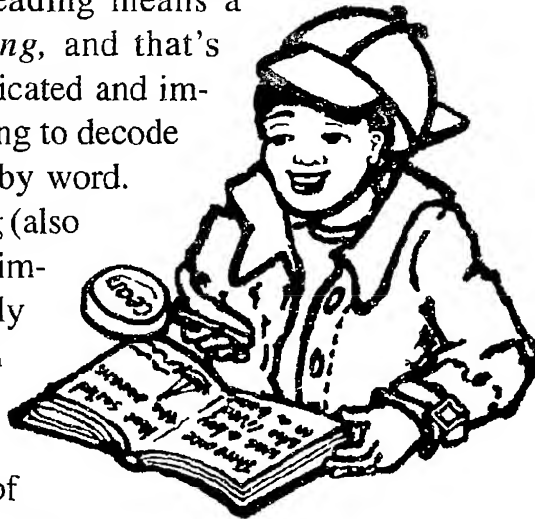
Summary

Let's review the things you can do to help your child learn to read:

1. Provide a positive home environment for study—one that is free from the pressures of the classroom.
2. Begin with exercises that match your child's abilities so that success is assured. Then move on to more challenging projects.
3. Let your child know that his or her efforts are important to you.
4. Listen to your child read and retell stories.
5. Provide a work space that is set aside just for your child.
6. Encourage your child through difficult times by showing that you value education and you know that he or she can succeed.

The Reading Process: Building Meaning

Before looking at specific techniques to help your child, ask yourself what reading means to you. In this book, the term *reading* does not mean merely pronouncing words or scanning the page for specific facts. Reading means a search for *meaning*, and that's much more complicated and important than learning to decode (sound out) word by word. Although decoding (also called *phonics*) is important in the early stage as children learn to match sounds with letters, it is only one of many tools that a reader uses to build meaning—that is, *to read*.



Laying the Foundation

To get a sense of what reading is, think about what you have done so far.



You chose to examine this book because you are interested in your child's welfare. You want him or her to succeed in school and in life.



You know that reading ability is probably the most valuable skill a person has in the search for knowledge in school and in continued learning on the job.



You know that those who do not read well often have problems in school, often are unemployed, and therefore cannot live satisfactory lives in our knowledge-based society.

For those reasons, you want to help your child develop reading ability to its highest level. In other words, you are interested and motivated. You think you can make a difference, and you are entirely correct. No one is more important to your child's success in reading than you are.

Setting a Purpose

Once the topic of this book drew you inside its pages, you probably wanted to see if the contents and the style suited your needs. Thus you set a *purpose* by asking yourself questions that you wanted answered. As you move through a section in this book, you have a sense of whether or not you are getting helpful answers to your questions or are building a meaning that suits your purpose. As you read, new questions or different purposes begin to surface. Then you start to monitor your comprehension anew. You keep asking if you are learning anything helpful. If you are not, you adjust by rereading, looking ahead, stopping to reflect, or looking up definitions. As a mature reader, you regularly monitor your progress toward building meaning.



Checking progress

When you are finished with a section, you may ask yourself: "Now what do I know? What is useful here? How am I different? Am I better prepared to help my child with reading? Did this book offer helpful resources for parents?" Even though you may not be aware that you are asking questions and summarizing as you go along, you are in fact doing these things because they are part of your skill as a mature, efficient reader.

That's what effective reading is: a thinking process that starts with interest and purpose, works to build meaning, and changes the individual's mind or feelings. You can do much to help your child develop the same long-range sense of reading.

Mature readers have already mastered the complex process of reading. They understand that reading is a search for meaning and that the main purpose of reading is to construct a message. Because the skills of reading have become second nature to the experienced reader, it's sometimes difficult to step back and remember what the beginner must do. What does it take for a young child to learn how to deal with the printed page and construct a message in the mind? We will discuss some of the things a reader's mind can do as it builds meaning.

Engaging the mind

In the first place, it's very helpful for you and your child to start from the idea that *the reader is engaged in a kind of conversation with the writer*. Although it's not the same as a face-to-face talk, both the reader and the writer bring important ideas to their "meeting." The writer starts the process by presenting a topic and generating a certain direction of thought. However, readers will be able to make sense of the message only if they also bring background and thoughts to the message. If the writer and reader don't share enough mutual ideas, there is no communication. In the end, it will be the reader who constructs meaning based on interaction with the writer. With that in mind, let's find ways for you to help your child engage in this complex interaction.

Try it yourself!

What brought you to this book? _____

What do you want from reading this book? _____

The Stages of the Reading Experience

If you plan to go skiing, what kinds of things would you do? You would probably follow a procedure something like this:

—First, you would get the right clothes, select appropriate boots and skis, and make sure everything is in good condition for the ski slope.

—Then, while you are skiing, you would pay close attention to balance, direction, maintaining control, and having a good time with your friends.

—Finally, when the ski runs are over, you would dry out your clothes, take a hot bath, and relive the events of the day.

Almost any major activity can be viewed in three stages, much like the ski trip just discussed.

A. Preparation—the things you do to get ready before the activity itself begins.

B. Engagement—the attention you pay and the effort you exert to make the activity successful.

C. Follow-up—the things you think and talk about after the activity has been completed.

Reading should also be viewed as a major activity. Even though it is a continuous, integrated process, it can be better understood if we also look at it in three stages: *before*, *during*, and *after* reading. By considering different aspects of reading, we can improve its teaching and learning. The outline and explanations that follow can help us focus on skills and strategies that make us more effective, but we certainly don't want to make the mistake of confusing some of these skills and strategies with the total act of reading.

This overview of the reading process will help emphasize an important point that should guide everything we do: Readers actively *build* meaning—they don't passively soak it up. Readers must make a conscious effort to construct a meaning from the text they are reading. All the other things you do should help your child build meaning. Unless that focus on constructing meaning is maintained, the other activities may become distractions instead of aids. Let's look at the important things to keep in mind about each of the three stages we have just mentioned.



Before reading

Think of this as a warm-up period, a time of mental preparation. Just as athletes stretch to get ready for a game, so can readers look at a book or chapter and get the “lay of the land.” They can see if there is any mutual ground with the author and think about what they already know about the subject. This helps them establish a sense of direction so that they can focus their reading right from the start instead of drifting through the sentences without knowing where they are going.

Ask child to approach a new story or article by flipping through the pages to see what ideas pop up and to get an overview of the whole passage. Such preparation helps to establish a sense of *purpose* for reading. It is quite helpful, then, for you to ask: “What would you like to get out of this article? What purpose can you set for yourself?”

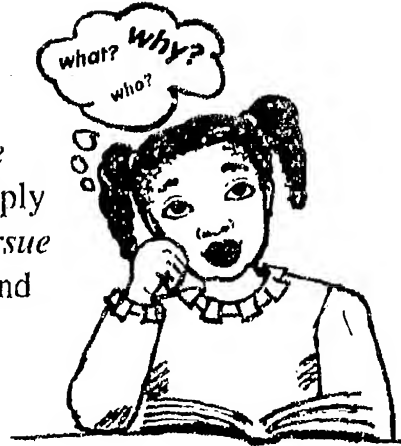
Discuss your child’s preliminary ideas and look at any words that may be unfamiliar. These stretching exercises are most valuable in helping readers focus on the type of selection, on the vocabulary, and on the reasons for reading. By taking time to preview the selection, you emphasize the importance of building meaning.

**Here are some questions
you can talk about
to get ready to read
a new selection:**

- ✧ What is this story or passage about?
What is the main topic?
- ✧ What do you already know about this topic?
- ✧ Are there any unfamiliar words we should discuss?
- ✧ Do you have any past experiences that relate to this story?
- ✧ What is your *purpose* for reading?
What would you like to find out? (How the detective solved the mystery?
What it's like to climb a mountain or dive beneath the sea? How an airplane is constructed? How the Egyptians built the pyramids?)

During reading

Reading must be an *active* undertaking. Good readers apply *effort* to their reading and *pursue* their understanding of ideas and information. In a way, they wrestle the ideas to the ground and struggle to make them manageable.



You can help children as they read by reminding them to keep searching for answers to the questions raised in the “warm-up” before reading. Don’t expect your child simply to read the words silently. Instead, encourage an active approach by engaging in a discussion about what you and your child are reading.

Here are some questions you might ask as you go along:

- ❖ What new ideas or questions are you encountering?
- G** How can you find the answers to your questions?
- ❖ Does this story or article make sense?

More questions you might ask:

- ✧ What should you do if you don't understand something?
- ✧ Can you look ahead and make predictions?
- ✧ Would it help to review what you've already read?
- ✧ Should you look up key words and clarify definitions?
- ✧ Should you read slower to adjust to the difficulty of the material?

By asking similar questions, you remind your child that a good reader is flexible and is always thinking. For example, in your discussion before reading, your child may have formed certain ideas about what the book or story will be like. By the end, some of these ideas may not have worked out. That's fine. It is quite appropriate to change perspectives and to rethink ideas in the active struggle to build meaning.

After reading

At the end of the day, people often take a moment to ask themselves: "What does this day mean to me? What value does it have?" After cleaning the house or finishing a project at work, don't you step back for a moment to relish the way it looks or to think what the project means for your company or for you?

Reading is like that, too. When children come to the end of the story or chapter or book, you want them to admire what they've done and to see where the ideas will help them.

Aid the process by asking questions such as these:

- ✧ What new ideas or questions are you encountering?
- ✧ Did you like this story?
- ✧ What was most important to you?
- ✧ Is this story like any other story you have read?

More questions:

- ✧ Are there some parts that you want to share with me?
- ✧ How can you use these ideas and experiences?

Through this kind of follow-up discussion, you encourage children to consolidate their reading experience and to put some finishing touches on the meaning they have built. Questions such as those just given can help children do two things that bring their reading into focus and increase its value:

**Summarize ideas.
Apply the experience.**

The ability to do these things is the logical result of the questions that were raised at the outset when your child set out to establish a purpose for reading. They should be the goals your child works for.

Skills and Meaning

The most important thing you can do is to help your child maintain a focus on *meaning*. It's like keeping your mind set on winning the game in sports. In the middle of a basketball game, you don't distract yourself by wondering if you are dribbling the ball correctly. Instead, you work intensely to win the game. During practice sessions you can ask yourself what you have to do to improve your dribbling or passing or foul shooting.

So, too, in reading you want to keep pursuing the meaning: "Does this make sense to me? What can I do to get it to make sense to me?" Just as a basketball player must have skills in order to win the game, a reader must have skills in order to make sense of the printed page. Those skills are taught in school and are practiced whenever your child reads. However, you may want to help your son or daughter with some of the more important skills as you are reading together. Those important skills are *decoding*, finding *relationships*, and *evaluating*. These will be discussed on the following pages.



Decoding

Decoding (phonics) is a basic skill for reading. It simply means that children gradually learn to recognize the sounds represented by letters and combinations of letters: the /d/ sound in *dog*, the /sh/ sound in *shop*, and so on. After all, the alphabet is a print code for speech sounds—though not a perfect one. Each child must learn to match the letters of the alphabet with the sounds used in speech. In your role as a gentle tutor, you can be most effective by keeping your child focused on the big picture.

If your child stumbles over a word or asks for help in pronouncing it, use the following pattern of questions to help:

- ❖ What word makes sense there?
- ❖ What word begins with the same sound as the one in the book?
- ❖ Do you see any phonics patterns (spelling patterns) in the word that could help you in getting the word?
That means, can you sound it out?

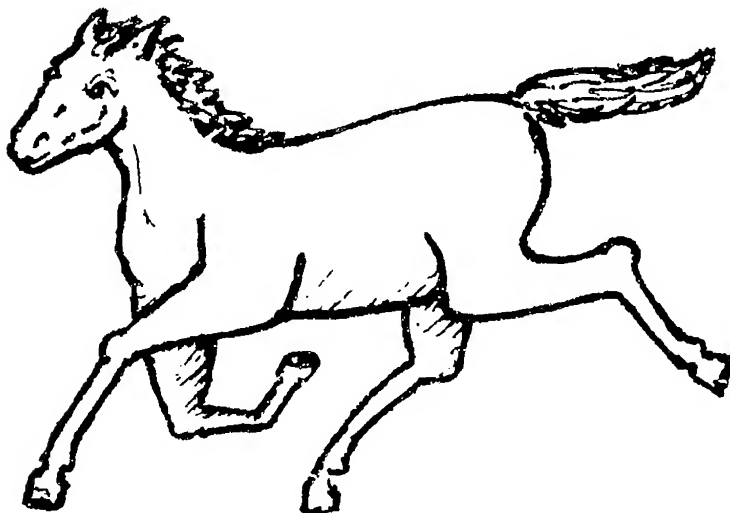
If you keep asking that series of questions, you help your child approach a decoding problem as a way of making sense. If she still doesn't come up with the correct word, tell her what it is and move on. If you notice that the decoding problems are numerous, alert your child's teacher. All it takes is a note or a quick telephone call. Maybe the teacher will ask you to help your child with some material that can be sent home for practice.

Try this exercise to help children decode for meaning. First read the following sentence:

"The horses were playing in the field. All of a sudden they were galloping full speed as if they were in a race."

If your child doesn't know the word *galloping*, ask these questions:

1. What word makes sense there?
(*running*). YES
2. What word begins with the same sound?
(*gate*). OK
3. Do you see any phonics patterns?
(*g-a-l = gal* and *i-n-g = ing*) YES
4. Can you read the sentence again using this new word?



Finding relationships

Probably the most important skill a reader needs is the ability to find relationships among ideas. It is this skill that enables a person to draw conclusions, make comparisons, and make a generalization about a series of events or ideas. A person displays this skill in responding to questions such as these:

- ✧ What is this all about? (What is the theme?)
- ✧ Is this story like any other story you have read? (Compare and contrast)
- ✧ After reading that article, what conclusions do you draw?
- ✧ What is the main argument she is using? (Following an argument)
- ✧ What do you think the main character will do next?

Many teachers see the ability to find relationships as a series of related skills, and they teach them separately to give students an opportunity to define and to practice.

You may assume, of course, that the teacher in school is working regularly to help students find relationships. You can promote the use of these skills through the kinds of questions you ask your child. Seeing relationships may take much time and practice for a child to achieve, so give her a chance to develop these skills. Once again, if you are concerned that your child does not know how to discuss questions like those listed above, draw the teacher's attention to her need. She may set up a practice program in which you can help.

For the sake of simplicity, you may want to think of all these skills as falling into the single notion of seeing relationships. Then your starting question can be:

"Do you see a way of connecting these ideas or of gaining a clearer understanding of what is happening?"

But you need to be prepared to follow up with a question that offers more guidance. Most students require specific directions.



The sample activity sheets on the following pages show ways to direct your child's thinking about common relationships that appear in stories and in information pieces.

Determining the Theme or Main Idea

1) What do you think was the most important thing about the story you just read?

2) Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or Why not? _____

Comparing and Contrasting Likenesses and Differences

How are these things alike and how are they different? In the left column, list some ways these things are alike; in the right column, list some ways they are different.

Example:		Car.....Bicycle	
<u>ALIKE</u>		<u>DIFFERENT</u>	
have wheels, forms of transportation, inventions		4 or 2 wheels, you ride in a car but on a bicycle, cars go faster	
Restaurant		Supermarket	
_____		_____	
_____		_____	
Dog		Cat	
_____		_____	
_____		_____	
Computer		Calculator	
_____		_____	
_____		_____	
Baseball		Basketball	
_____		_____	
_____		_____	
School		Home	
_____		_____	
_____		_____	

Now think of yourself and a friend or your brother or sister.
How are you alike and how are you different?

Predicting Subsequent Events

What do you think will happen next?

The dog sees a rabbit by the edge of the woods. _____

The traffic light turns green. _____

The bell rings at school. _____

Marie left the water running in the bath and answered the phone. She had a very long conversation. _____

Tom heard the rain and realized the windows were open in his car. _____

Determining Logical Expectations

Can you name this place?

There is a lot of grass and there are trees and swings
and a slide. Lots of children come here to play. _____

This is a big building. There are many aisles that have
different foods and other things that you can buy. _____

There are many seats that all face the same direction.
There is a big screen and the room gets dark. _____

Cars and trucks come and go. People stand outside
holding a tube with a nozzle attached to a pump. _____

Make up your own riddle about a place. _____

Describing the Logic of an Argument

Fill in the missing word or words that completes the sentence.

Jenny is standing in the middle of a field. There is a big barn at one end of the field and there are cows and horses in the pasture. Jenny is visiting a _____.

When Juan woke up this morning he went outside and saw there were a lot of puddles that were not there yesterday. Last night it must have _____.

At three o'clock yesterday afternoon the siren wailed. There was no fire and no ambulances. The sky was dark and it looked like a storm. The siren must have been a _____.

The game was tied 3 to 3. All the bases were loaded and it was Molly's turn to bat. On the third pitch, there was a loud thwack. Molly let go of the bat and ran as fast as she could. She ran passed first and second and third and rounded the corner to home. She made it! The score was now _____.

Cause and Effect

What would happen if...

John and Justin oversleep on a school morning?

Teresa and Mark forget about the brownies that are baking in the oven? _____

The water was left running in the sink? _____

Kelly forgot to water the plants? _____

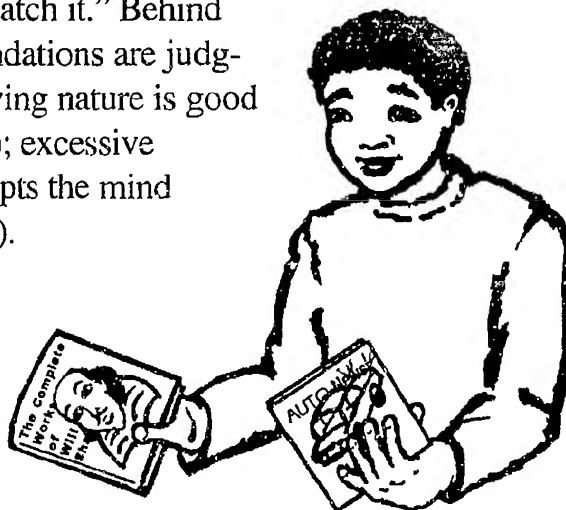
David left his keys at home? _____

Evaluating

“Is that movie any good? Would you recommend that book? Why are you going to vote for that person?”

We respond to evaluation questions all the time. It is a natural part of our interaction with others to make judgments and to reflect positive and negative reactions to events in the world around us. We call this *critical thinking*—the kind of thinking that requires us to use what we know in order to form judgments and determine value.

As our children read, we want them to act like critical thinkers. They are accustomed to critical thinking in many aspects of their lives, and we want them to learn to think critically about their reading. Most children have heard their parents encourage them to watch some television programs and not to watch others. “Why don’t you watch this National Geographic program on endangered animals. It will make us aware of how we can preserve nature.” “That television show has too much violence in it. I do not want you to watch it.” Behind our recommendations are judgments: preserving nature is good (OK to watch); excessive violence corrupts the mind (do not watch).



In our discussions about books and articles, then, we can encourage critical thinking and help children learn to evaluate by asking questions like these:

- ✧ What do you think the main character will do next?
- ✧ How is that information useful?
- ✧ Why did you like (not like) that part of the story?
- ✧ How could you change the story to get this character to act in an ethical way?
- ✧ Who else should read this? Why?



Use the exercise on the following page as a sample of how to prompt your child to evaluate events.

Making Judgments

Tristan is ten years old. He lives in a big city and goes to school a few blocks from his apartment. Yesterday, when he was walking home from school he saw something lying on the sidewalk. When he bent down, he realized it was a wallet.

He picked up the wallet and looked inside. There was a twenty-dollar bill and a driver's license with someone's name and address. He walked home quickly and thought about all the things he could buy with twenty dollars. As soon as he got home he told his Dad about the wallet and together they contacted the owner.

Do you think Tristan did the right thing? Why or why not?

Why do you think Tristan told his Dad?

How would you feel if it was your wallet that Tristan found?

Applying Information

Write a short news broadcast about someone who does something good. Here are some possible beginnings for headlines:

GIRL SAVES

CLASS RAISES MONEY FOR

BOY FINDS A

CHILDREN RESCUE

Determining standards

As children mature, we want them to use standards or values in evaluating what they read or watch. Everyone can make a judgment based on feelings—"I liked it because it made me feel good." But that kind of statement does not develop critical thinking unless we prompt deeper thought: "What do you mean when you say that it made you feel good?" That kind of question forces the student to think about his or her feelings.

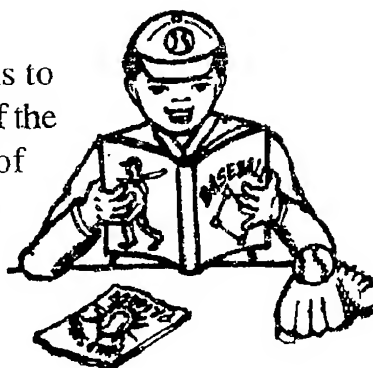
Gradually we want our children to make judgments based on *criteria and values* that they can identify. We want them to be able to respond to a question like, "Why do you recommend (or object to) this book?"

Parent Action

As you can see, the important skills listed above are not deep secrets hidden from everyone except the high priests of education. But in order for children to use these skills easily and regularly, they must have a lot of practice, as they would for any skill. Although skills are taught in school, some children may not have sufficient practice opportunities there to make them second nature. That's where you can help. Keep your child reading for meaning, and guide your child's thinking by asking the kinds of questions that we have just discussed—not as a test, but as a way of learning and discussing things that interest you.

Improving Your Child's Reading Comprehension

The purpose for reading is to build an understanding of the printed message. All of your efforts, therefore, should be directed to that end: *understanding*.



Be direct

If children demonstrate that they already understand the message, praise them and get out of the way. Don't dwell on practice activities when your child shows that the job is done. But since most children are often challenged by the textbooks and the stories they read, parents often need to assist them by following a regular process.

Earlier we talked about what should be done before, during, and after reading. We made some general suggestions that should help to focus attention and encourage your child to take an active approach by always raising questions and looking for answers. Now we will look at some more specific activities you can use to help your child search for meaning *before*, *during*, and *after* reading.

Talk about unfamiliar words

Once you have selected a story or book, look through it to find out if there are difficult or unfamiliar words. Depending on the situation, either talk about the words before the child reads the story or bring them up in discussion afterwards. These discussions should emphasize meaning and not turn into a lengthy technical lesson on word structure.

If it is obvious that a story will contain some difficult words, then be sure to talk about those words beforehand. For example, if a second-grader is about to read a book that mentions "cumulus clouds" or "alligators in a swamp," she may have no idea of what *cumulus*, *alligator*, or *swamp* refer to and may not be able to link the words with the things they represent.

Whenever possible, refer to pictures and use the words in simple sentences that define the words in context (such as "The white, fluffy cumulus clouds drifted across the clear sky"). This is especially important if the unfamiliar word is used in the story without any hints as to what it means. After the story you can reinforce the meaning of *cumulus* by asking your child to talk about cumulus clouds or draw pictures.



Context

If unfamiliar words represent emotions or abstract concepts, then pictures may not be available. Ask your child to explain the words by using them in short sentences. For example, if the word *proud* is the problem, then your child might say, "John was *proud* of himself for getting an A on the spelling test. He felt good because he knew he had worked hard and proved he could do it." This kind of elaboration helps to define the word *proud* by saying what John did, how he felt, and why knew he should take pride in his effort. Whenever possible, use the context of the story to explain the meaning of words.

Multiple meanings

As you know, many words shift their meaning as they are used in different contexts. A word that is obvious in one sentence may be confusing in another. If your child reads, "The dog can *run* fast," he will probably have no trouble knowing the meaning of *run* in that context. However, she may be puzzled when he reads, "Mayor Grumble will *run* for Congress this year" or "There was a *run* on the bank." (In fact, the Random House College Dictionary lists 135 definitions for the word *run*.) Despite this multiple-meaning problem, it is possible over time to understand various meanings by first figuring out how the word is used in a particular sentence or paragraph.

Words with Multiple Meanings

Some words have more than one meaning. Look up these words in the dictionary and write two different definitions for each word. Illustrate one of your definitions.

Glass _____

Can _____

Lie _____

Pop _____

Bow _____

Set a clear purpose

We read for different reasons, and young readers need to set purposes so that they create some expectations. Of course, you shouldn't impose your own purpose for reading on your child. You want her to think for herself. Therefore, discuss what she wants to get out of the story. In this way, your child learns to ask questions that the story may answer, such as "What problems might come up on a cross-country hike?" or "What would it feel like to practice hard for the big race and then lose?"

Before a child reads anything, she must have the background needed to understand it. After all, it would be difficult to understand a character's fear of the Everglades if you have no sense of that swampy environment and the animal life there. That's the reason it helps to pick stories that interest your child. One purpose for reading, of course, is to add new information about personal interests. You can increase her interest in horse stories simply by expanding her knowledge about the care and training of horses.

Another purpose for reading is to introduce your child to new areas of interest (knights and the Middle Ages, or life in primitive tribes in Australia, for instance), or to widen your child's understanding about a recent experience (for example, through a guidebook from a family trip). By fitting reading into daily life, you make it real and reduce the number of problems that might arise.

At the end of this book you will find a series of short stories designed for children in the first, second, and third grades. Questions are included with each story. The stories and questions can serve as models to show how you can first prepare your child for reading and then follow up after reading.

Why Should I Read This?

Draw a line between the title of a book and the question it would answer.

Rainy Day Activities

**Where does honey
come from?**

Bee Keeping

**Where can my family
go camping?**

Abby the Pioneer Girl

**How are lions and
tigers alike?**

Castles

**Do snakes have
nests?**

National Parks

**What do I need to
go fishing?**

The Feline Family

**Where did kings and
queens live?**

**Growing Flowers
and Vegetables**

**What was it like
to travel in a
covered wagon?**

Rods and Reels

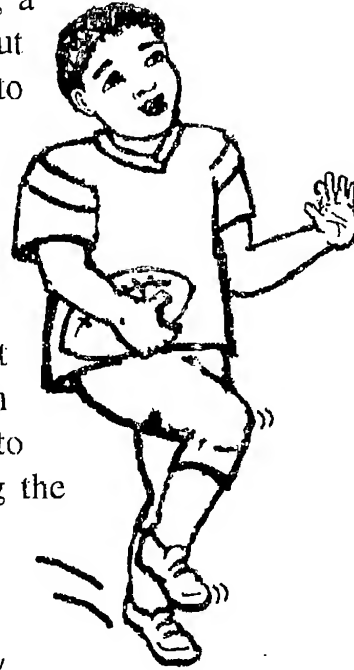
**What games can I
play on a rainy day?**

Animals Without Feet

**How can I start
a garden?**

Ask questions to aid thinking

While your child is reading a book or article, ask questions about the passage and encourage him to raise his own questions as well. This serves the twofold purpose of focusing attention ("How many times did Bill try to make the team?") and setting a purpose for reading ("If a boy tried to get on the football team but didn't run fast enough, what could he do to have a better chance of making the team the next year?").



If any of these questions prove difficult, help your child by discussing what you would do to answer those questions. For example, you could ask what Bill did to make himself a better player and what the coach thought about Bill's extra effort. Show how you would think through the problem. After all, this is not a test. You are both searching for solutions to your purpose questions. You could then reread the story with your child. In this way you help him to achieve success as a reader and, conversely, help to avoid the sense of failure that can dampen enthusiasm for reading.

Questions I Might Ask

1. What is this story about?

2. Is this like another story you have read?

3. What do you like about the main character?

4. What do you think he or she will do next?

5. What would you do if you were in the story?

6. What was your favorite part of the story?
Why? _____

7. What was your least favorite part of the
story? Why? _____

8. Who else do you think should read this? Why?

9. If you were going to write a new ending for
the story what would it be? _____

Ask follow-up questions

After your child finishes a story or chapter, ask her to find the sentence that answers a specific question. This prompts rereading for a definite purpose. For example, "Can you find the sentence in the story that tells when Frank decided he could land the airplane?" These are *literal questions* that have clear answers which can be located in the text. They offer a good way to focus on important events and ideas.

If you believe it will help your child to focus better, you can ask questions that call for close attention to the content of the story: "Why did the people of the town want to cut down the old tree?" Questions can serve as a point of departure for a discussion of issues raised by a story: "Do you think the old tree in the park was as important as the new building that was built in its place?"

You can also ask questions that require *interpretation* of a passage. ("How did Johnny feel when his horse died?" "Why did the girls run away?") These kinds of questions allow your child to show her understanding in her own way. Such questions are very valuable because they move beyond the events of the story and lead each child to form individual opinions and make the story a part of personal experience.

Follow-up questions can be used to resolve major purposes for reading. Here are sample purposes. See if you and your child can formulate questions to help achieve those purposes.

Purposes



Determine if you want to read more stories of this kind.



Hold information or ideas in mind in order to summarize for a test.



Briefly retell a story to convince someone else to read it.



Decide whether or not a book or passage is valuable enough to keep on your bookshelf.



Find information or ideas that will help you win an argument.

Sample Questions for Your Child

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Hold a conversation.

After a story is finished and the two of you are talking about it, avoid giving the impression that your questions are part of a "test." Just hold a conversation. The child should be offered a chance to say what he thinks about the story. Here, there are no "right" answers, and your discussion may bring out interests or reading problems that can be addressed later. You can open up wonderful opportunities for good talk with simple questions such as, "Did you like the story?" or "Were there any parts you thought were a little hard to understand?" or "What parts were most interesting to you?"

**The questions you ask
should aid your child's thinking.
Here are some typical examples:**

- ✧ "What do you think this word means?"
- ✧ "Why does a treasure hunt make such an interesting story?"
- ✧ "Were the characters wrong to do what they did?"

Here are some more examples:

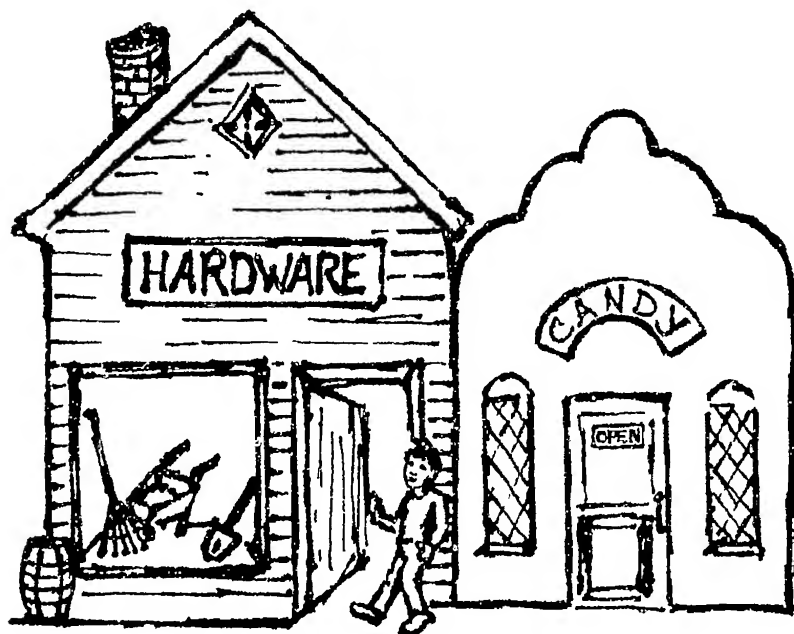
- ✧ "What would you have done in that situation?"
- ✧ "What did you like best about the story?"
- ✧ "Did you like reading about imaginary worlds?"

Take care not to overwhelm your child. Obviously, if you ask scores of questions about the same short reading passage, he is likely to become confused or feel that he is being tested. Think of the way you would hold a conversation with an adult friend about a book or a magazine article. Questions would be open-ended, and you would share opinions and responses ("What did you think of that?"); you wouldn't "grill" your friend to see if he or she could get the "right answers." Keep that frame of reference and your child will be eager to please you.

Sentence meaning

Very young children usually need regular help with reading. In their struggle to decipher the printed page, they may begin to concentrate on individual letters and words. Parents can help by reminding them that *sentences* are the important units of meaning.

Draw attention to the meanings of whole sentences by asking questions that require an understanding of groups of words. (For example, given the sentence, "Jimmy walked to the hardware store," you could ask, "What kind of store did Jimmy go to, and how did he get there?") Giving your child practice in completing sentences from a book is another way to remind him of the sentence unit. (For instance, you can ask what word best fits into the blank in the sentence: "When I'm tired at night, I get into bed and go to _____.")



Here are a few other ways you can help to increase awareness of sentence meanings and story context.

❖ **Read for sentence meaning.** If a single word is unfamiliar, it can interfere with the reader's ability to understand an entire sentence. When this happens, you should encourage your child to go back over the sentence and try to think of a word that makes sense in that spot. This helps to emphasize that the most important thing is to *discover meaning*.

As an example, your child might read,

*"She had never seen such a beautiful **synagogue**. She was happy to be celebrating a most important Jewish holy day there."*

It may be possible to figure out that the unfamiliar word *synagogue* is some kind of place of worship. The context of two sentences brings a sense that *synagogue* is a place where Jewish people worship.

❖ **Allow your child to substitute words.** If a child understands the context of a story and picks up meaning along the way, he may be able to predict some appropriate words even if they are not the exact words in print. When this happens, you need not correct the child, especially if he is just learning to read. Your first concern is that he is thinking and gets reasonable meaning from the text.

For example, if the story says, "We saw a herd of cows on my uncle's farm," your child may read it as,

“We saw a bunch of cows on my uncle’s farm.” He hasn’t changed the meaning of the story and has shown that he is paying attention. If you stop your child and make him correct the word, you may interfere with a very useful, mature reading strategy of *predicting meaning*. First and foremost, keep the focus on meaning: “Does that make sense?” You can always go back later and point out that there were many cows in the picture, and that is what *herd* means.

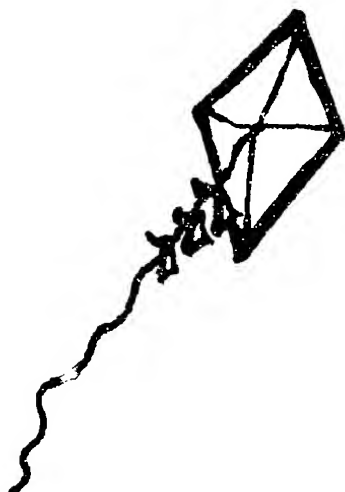
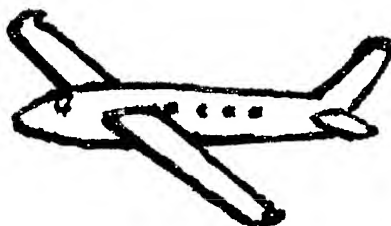
At that point, you can ask how that word begins (with an *h*) and what sound-spelling pattern can be used to recognize the word in the future (for example, *herd* sounds like *her* + *d*). You might also mention that the cows can be referred to as a *group* or *bunch*, but there are sometimes special words for groups of things, such as a *herd* of cows or a *flock* of birds. Ask if your child can think of any more words of this kind. You may be able to find a reference book that lists such *collective nouns* naming groups of individuals or things: *family*, *crowd*, *group*, *team*, *army*, *committee*, or *tribe*, for example.

Obviously, if a clearly incorrect word is substituted in a sentence, you shouldn’t ignore that. For instance, if the word *group* is read as *grow up*, it means that the child has substituted a word or phrase that does not make sense and he needs to rethink the situation and to focus more carefully on meaning. Once again, you should avoid criticizing your child for being “wrong.” Simply give him the correct word and have him continue reading. After the section is finished, you can come back to the word and have your child use it in a sentence. You could even ask him to look for or draw pictures showing groups of things.

✧ **Supply words in incomplete sentences.** A good way to get a child to think about the context of a sentence is to ask her to fill in a word that is missing from a sentence. In the sentence:

Mary saw a _____ flying in the sky.

...the child might suggest *bird*, *airplane*, *kite*, or *balloon* as the missing word. You could then be more specific by asking, "What can fly in the sky and starts with the letter *b*?" Because there may be more than one possible answer (as here with *balloon* or *bird*), you may use pictures or additional clues: "What can fly and ends with the letter *d*?"



Variety of Correct Answers

Fill in the missing word. There can be more than one correct answer.

1) Diego saw a _____ flying in the sky.

2) Keisha picked up the _____ and threw it to Tammy.

3) Reiko went into the clothing store and bought a _____.

4) James wanted a _____ for dessert.

5) Suzanne rode her _____ to school.

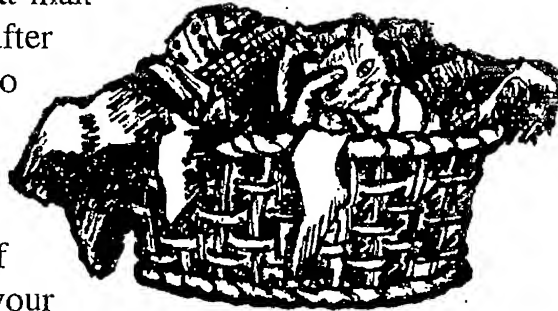
6) Abby played forward on the _____ team.

7) Justin heard the _____ jump into the pond.

8) Sophie usually got to roll the dice first whenever they played _____.

Stories for Practice Reading

The next few pages contain stories you can use to practice some of the ideas in this chapter. The reading process involves getting the mind focused before reading; then reading with a purpose and monitoring your progress at making meaning; and, after reading, trying to wrap it up.



As you read through some of these stories with your child, you will probably work most effectively by making these exercises a kind of conversation. We have given you a few ideas for those conversations before and after reading, but let the story topics and the natural drift of any conversation lead the two of you. As with any reading experience, you want your child to build meaning and to understand that he has to be an active and thoughtful reader.

THE SCHOOL BUS DRIVER*

(Early First Grade)

Before Reading

You can start by talking with your child about what a person might see on a bus ride: the people riding the bus, the things outside the window, and so on. You could lead into the story by saying it's about a bus driver who does funny things, and ask, "What do you suppose the bus driver does that's funny? Let's read the story and find out."

o o o

I go to school on a school bus.

My friends ride on the bus, too.

We like to ride on the school bus
because a funny woman drives the bus.

She drives and she sings.

She sings to the birds.

She sings to the cats.

She sings to my friends.

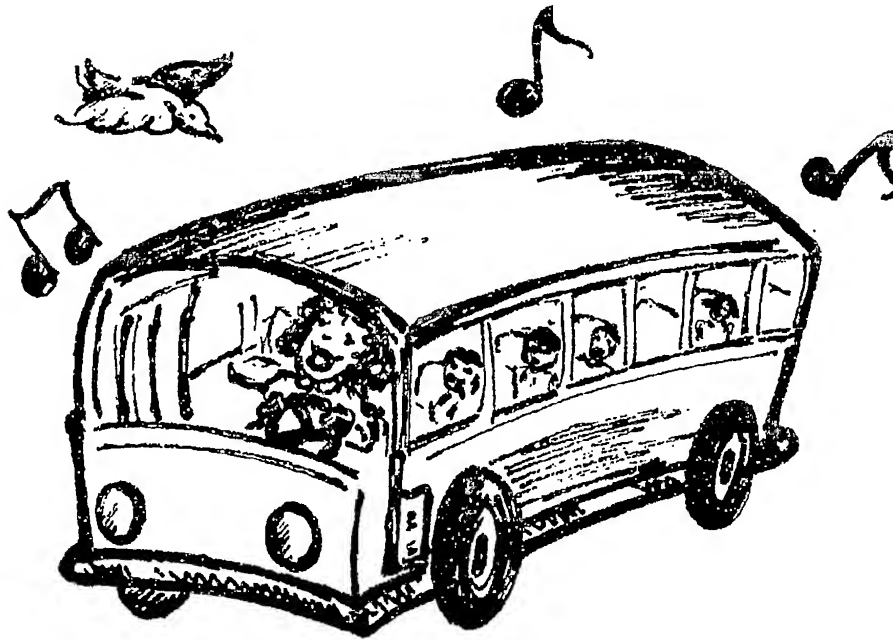
And we all sing, too.

o o o

After Reading

- ◆ Would you like to ride on that school bus?
- ◆ Why?
- ◆ Why do you think the children liked that bus driver?

Let your child express his or her own ideas but also join in the fun. Give your own ideas and just talk about the story as you might talk about a television show you had watched together.



* This group of stories is taken from *Help Your Child Read and Succeed* by Carl B. Smith. They are used with permission of the author.

THE SINGING FROG

(Late First Grade)

Before Reading

This is a story about a most unusual frog. You might ask your child what a real frog would do, and then lead into this story about an imaginary frog who does things no one could ever guess.

o o o

Freddy Frog did not have many things.

He did not have a bike or a car.

He did have one old book that he read again and again.

And he had a little bed to sleep in, but that was all.

Freddy Frog did not have many things, but he was happy by the lake.

He looked at the flowers, and he liked to dance.

But most of all Freddy Frog liked to sing.

In those days frogs did not sing.

They didn't think it was right for frogs to sing.

"Singing is for the birds," they said.

But Freddy Frog liked to sing.

And so he sang and sang because it made him happy.

Soon the other frogs tried to sing his song.

Can you sing Freddy Frog's song?

o o o

After Reading

Perhaps the best way to finish this story is to have your child sing like a frog. Most children love to make up tunes with "ribbit ribbit" sounds. But you might also like to talk about what made this frog different from ordinary frogs.



THE BEAR WHO WANTED TO BE DIFFERENT

(Early Second Grade)

Before Reading

This is about a bear who wanted to be different from all the other bears. What do you suppose a bear might do to try to be different? What might happen if a little bear tried to make himself look like some other animal? This story tells what happened when this bear tried to make himself look different.

o o o

A little black bear lived in the woods. He thought he was very special. But he saw that one little black bear looked just the same as any other little black bear. That did not make him feel like a special bear. He wanted to be different.

One day he watched a deer eating leaves off the trees. He decided he wanted to be like the deer. He would try to look like the deer. He would eat leaves of the trees. Then he would be different from the other little bears. Then he would be very special.

So he found some branches and tied them tight on his head. Now he thought he looked like a deer. Then he tried to eat some leaves. They were not very tasty.

They were not tasty like berries. He decided that maybe he would not eat leaves.

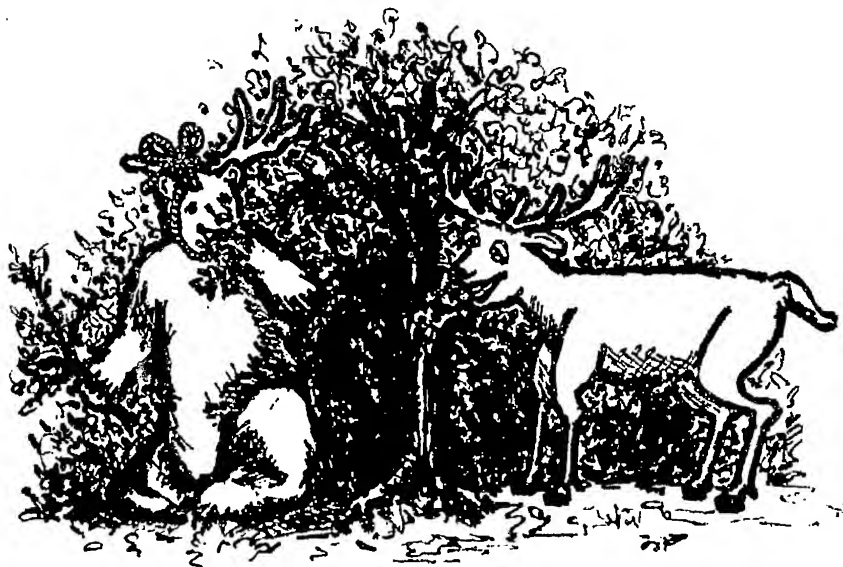
He went to show the other bears how special and different he was. But he did not look like a deer to them. They just asked him why he had branches on his head.

o o o

After Reading

- ✧ Is this a sad story or a happy one?
- ✧ Why?

Everyone wants to be special, and you may want to talk about the special qualities that each one of you possesses. Being special doesn't mean that you have to look like someone else. Where did the little bear go wrong?



LANA THE MUSICIAN

(Early Third Grade)

Before Reading

You might talk with your child about his or her own experience with music, whether that involves singing or playing, listening to records, or seeing musicians on television. "What instrument do you think a little girl in the third grade might play?" This story will tell you.

o o o

Music filled Lana's house. Every afternoon, Mother played the piano. Each member of the family went off to different rooms of the house to practice their music.

Lana went to the laundry room to practice. Jasmine the cat went with her. Lana played a wooden recorder. The recorder had a mouthpiece for blowing and seven air holes. Also there was one air hole underneath which was meant just for her thumb. Lana was just beginning to learn how to play. She knew what to do to make the notes, but sometimes the notes didn't want to cooperate.

Jasmine hid in the laundry basket when Lana played. That made Lana laugh.

o o o

After Reading

Most children will want to speculate why the cat hid in the laundry basket.

You could try to think of other instruments that third graders might play or discuss why each member of the family went to a different room of the house each afternoon. Practice, of course, is necessary for school work and sports, as well as music.

Would your child like to play a musical instrument? And practice regularly?



HERMAN THE TADPOLE

(Third Grade)

Before reading

This is a story about an unusual tadpole. What do you suppose real tadpoles do all day? What could one tadpole do that would make him the leader of all the other tadpoles?

o o o

Herman lived in a pond which was clean and cool. Everything seemed peaceful and quiet. Herman and his friends loved to play games and to dart around in the pond.

Now, he did have some problems. You see, he was very small, like all tadpoles. Snakes, fish, and even frogs were always trying to catch him for dinner. But they never caught Herman. He was fast and clever, and he always knew where to hide.

Since Herman was the fastest and the smartest of all the tadpoles, he became the leader.

He led his friends up and down the pond in search of food. And they always found some.

The other tadpoles thought Herman was the smartest tadpole they knew.

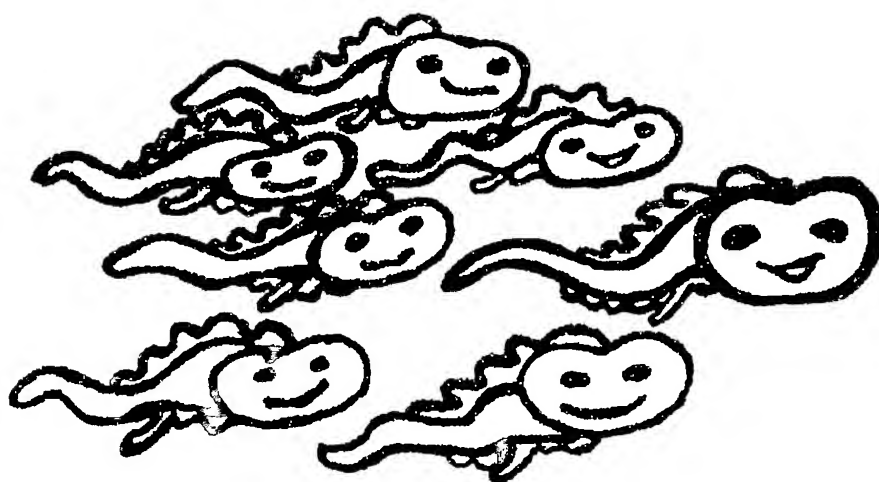
o o o

After Reading

You could easily turn this into a discussion of pond life, but first your child needs to understand that tadpoles are baby frogs. As tadpoles, however, they just don't look like frogs. And it should be interesting to your child to learn that one of the dangers tadpoles face is from frogs.

Where could you get more information on pond life? The library, certainly, and also the encyclopedia. Children's magazines often have features on animal life.

Just as a story, it is fun to speculate on why the other tadpoles would follow Herman as their leader. Where do leaders show up among children in school?



Conclusion

As you can see, reading and learning are inseparable. When you read, you must think. When you train your child to think in an orderly fashion, you are improving both reading and learning.

Plan. Effective reading and learning start with a plan, with a purpose. They monitor progress, and they bring the activity to a comprehensible conclusion. That's the reason that we have walked you through a pattern of thinking before, during, and after reading, just as you would in tackling any learning problem. Though simplistic in its formulation, this pattern of thinking will definitely improve the learning and reading of anyone who follows it.

Build skills. The second thing that we reminded you is that reading and learning effectively require skill. Some skills become almost mechanical, as in the matching letters and sounds in order to identify unfamiliar words. Some skills require constant refinement because they invoke the powers of abstract reasoning, as in determining cause and effect relationships in human behavior. No matter, all these essential and helpful skills demand practice, practice, practice before the learner is able to use them effortlessly.

Create an environment. The third area that we emphasized is the need for a positive environment for learning and reading. Parents and teachers can show that learning is valuable and interesting by the priority given to a place to work, the inclusion of books and equipment for learning, and by making a place for reading and study a focal point of the child's room or of one of the common room in the house.

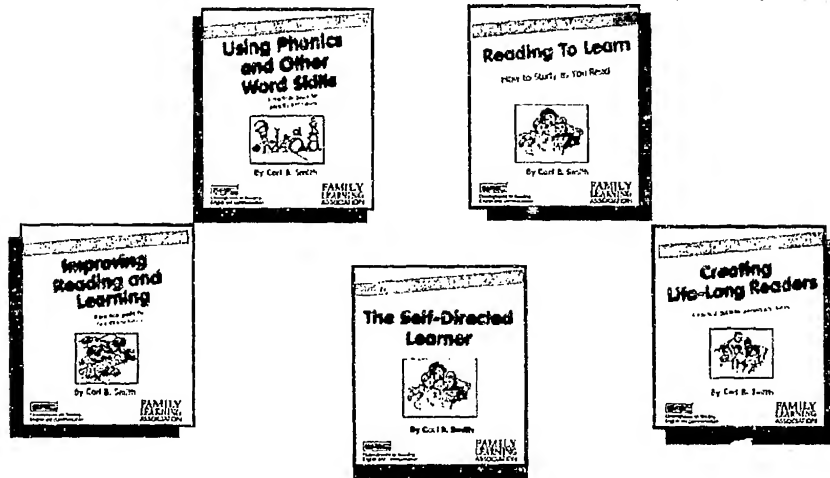
Understanding. The end goal in both reading and learning is the gift of understanding. As a guide to the child, we want to do what we can to help the child accomplish understanding. That is the goal and the reward of all their efforts with books. Interest and pleasure follow naturally from the child's realization that he understands what he is reading or that he can successfully manipulate the ideas in his textbook. The parent and the tutor help the child to accomplish understanding in whatever ways they can.

HELPING CHILDREN TO LEARN SERIES

This book gets us started on a series of short volumes that guide parents and tutors in their efforts to build effective readers and learners. Other books in this series treat: vocabulary and decoding skills; skills for critical thinking; skills for study reading; and guidelines for helping children select books that will motivate them to be lifelong readers and learners. These books are part a curriculum that develops self-directed learners. The principles and the components of this program are described in **The Self-Directed Learner**, published by ERIC & the Family Learning Association.

If you remember that you are always a learner and act like one in the presence of your child, you will help your child greatly no matter what level of education you may have or how much technical knowledge you can bring to the table. In love, learn with them.

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Improving Reading and Learning: tells how to create a positive environment to begin the reading process, then focuses on building meaning through the stages of the reading experience. Also offered are specific exercises to improve your child's reading comprehension and stories to practice reading.

Using Phonics and Other Word Skills: begins by defining the strategies needed to identify words, and follows up with visual and listening exercises. Includes sound-spelling patterns, and word structure activity sheets.

Reading to Learn: tackles flexibility and reading speed first by using the PARS Approach to Study Reading (Purpose, Ask, Read, Summarize), then moves on to following instructions and reading graphs and tables, with specific exercises on understanding bar, line, circle, and picture graphs, and maps.

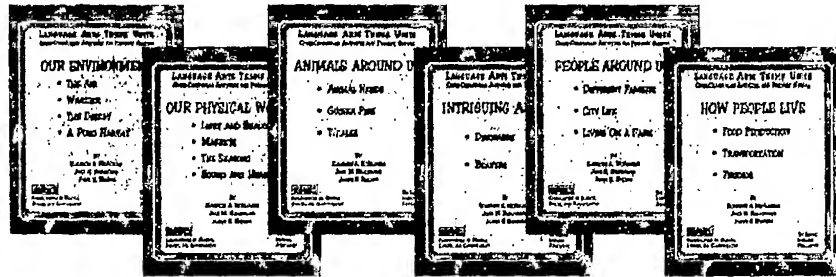
Creating Life-Long Readers: shows how to create interest and positive attitudes by using an interest inventory and the language story approach. Provides guidelines for reading aloud, followed by extensive book lists for every age group.

The Self-Directed Learner: provides the steps and principles needed for your kids to become responsible learners, and not just for their school careers, but for their whole lives. Gives practical tips to help you create an environment and build the skills your child needs to function as a self-directed learner.

1.800.759.4723

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**Also available from the Family Learning Association
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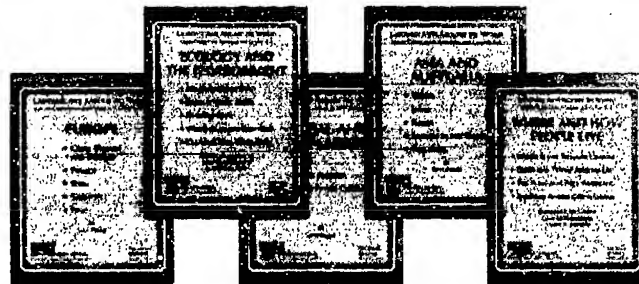
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What every parent and tutor needs —

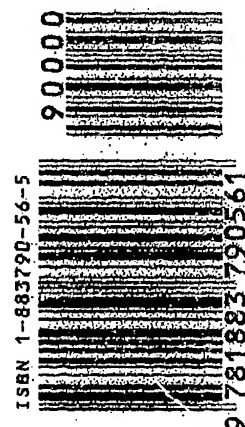
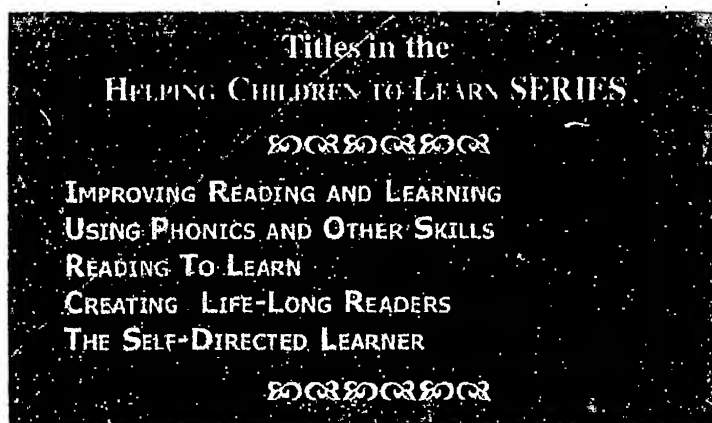
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